

EUGENE SPEICHER



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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EUGENE SPEICHER

BY

FRANK JEWETT MATHER, JR.



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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Publication of the books entitled
MARY CASSATT, GLENN O. COLEMAN *and*
ALLEN TUCKER *has been postponed.*
These volumes will appear in 1932.



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FOREWORD

THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.

For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*
Whitney Museum of American Art



Photograph by Tony Von Horn

EUGENE SPEICHER

EUGENE SPEICHER

BY

FRANK JEWETT MATHER, JR.

SHORTLY after I had promised to write this essay and had been refreshing my memory of Speicher's painting, that wise and profound book by Robert Henri, "The Art Spirit," first came into my hands. I found the pages of Speicher's sometime teacher and life-long friend singularly evocative. I could fairly see the night class of twenty-three years ago in hushed attention as Henri with his air of a beneficent Mephistopheles briskly entered. He was always surprising, and they were waiting for the new surprise. Perhaps it came that evening in this form: "What we need is more sense of the wonder of life and less of this business of making a picture." Probably he stopped before a study that presented the paid model flashily, and remarked: See her in her human dignity, and paint that.

As Henri passed about the place, certain words were thrown about almost ritually—"relations, organization, concert" (as a verb). Now and then these thoughts would come together in a saying like this: "The study of art is the study of the relative value of things. The factors of a work of art cannot be known constructively until their relative values are known."

These outbursts were taken most variously. Many merely felt the master was in uncommonly good form and kept on painting, not as he counselled but as he painted himself. Like Sir Joshua, Henri never profaned his teaching by practising it. George Bellows was there, and probably the maxims glanced off his burly shoulders as he continued to slash in a figure that James Huneker was soon to praise to the skies. Fifteen years later, and almost too late, Bellows was to come back worriedly to this teaching. At least three young men, who paused and frowned much at their studies while the others incessantly painted, took the idea in—

Rockwell Kent, Guy Pène du Bois, and a stocky and swarthy young holder of a scholarship from the Buffalo Academy, Eugene Speicher. They pondered, while some nice young lady for a moment tried to see the human dignity of the model, gave it up, and continued to paint like Henri.

Now if it were my literary habit to present the scheme of an essay in advance, most that I have to say about the painting of Eugene Speicher could be gathered from these maxims of his friend and adviser—Speicher's thoughtful and elaborate organization of the picture, based psychologically upon largeness of intention implying a profound sense of the dignity of the object represented, and, technically, upon the avoidance of short cuts or formulas as upon a preference for color over mere colors. This would cover in too general terms that unity which everyone feels in a Speicher whether it be a figure, a landscape, or a vase of cut flowers.

By this I do not mean to suggest that Speicher took his mental attitude bodily from Henri during the few months of pupilage, much less his very personal technique. I have taught enough myself to know that one actually teaches only a poor student, and him little that is worth while. In the case of a good student, at best one merely clarifies, releases and enhances a personal predisposition—really gives him no new ideas, but saves him some time in finding his own. Henri was profoundly and modestly aware of that when he said: "An artist is a master at the start, if he is ever going to be one. Masters are people who use what they have." So I am sure that the sturdy young man brought along with him from Buffalo a deep sense of the principle of organization, had had his whiff of the time spirit that was already wreaking itself fanatically and fantastically in the ateliers of Paris. It was merely fortunate for Speicher that under wise humanistic counsels he faced the problem of organization in terms of human dignity, of some high value outside himself, and not as a problem to be solved in a purely professional vacuum.

Before Alfred Stieglitz had shown the Matisse's and Cézanne's at "291," Speicher had exhibited, and before the Armory Show of 1913 he had been medalled by the National Academy and elected an Associate. He was already headed for the new quest of style along his own lines. I missed his first exhibits through absence in Italy, and I am chagrined in looking over my Academy notice for the *Evening Post*, in 1911, that I merely mentioned perfunctorily Speicher's portrait which won the Proctor Prize. I fear every seasoned gallery-goer establishes an unduly defensive habit of looking little at the prize pictures. At least such is my own case. Had Speicher's canvas been skied in the Morgue, I am sure its quiet excellence would not have escaped an eye somewhat dulled by the general mediocrity of the show.

What should have caught even a fagged and indisposed eye was the largeness of the drawing, the sense of a structure made from the inside out. This is what distinguishes any Speicher on a wall where other paintings hang. It is something more than the vivid and massive assertion of the geometry implicit in the form, as spherical, ovoid or tubular, though it contains that; it is an assertion of the grandeur and importance of the form—a moral as well as an aesthetic quality, the form being after all a symbol of some inherent human dignity. He paints the thinking behind the mask, or rather the mask as shaped by the thinking. Thus the men of Speicher have a characteristic shyness and endurance; the women, an equally characteristic withdrawal, as if they were calmly meditating somewhat perplexing alternatives offered by a not wholly friendly world. His sitters are apart with themselves and lightly linked if at all with the world of everyday action. One knows them in their depths, and not in terms of their superficial behavior. A Speicher girl may or may not over-indulge in cigarettes or cocktails. There is nothing in the picture that tells you about it. She will, however, act well in a delicate emergency, or at least Speicher believes she will.

This permanent and valid aspect of the sitter is built up by a con-

struction that is at once entirely painterlike and singularly precise. Not painterlike in the sense of my youth, that it is loosely and freely done. A Speicher, merely as painting, is so many strokes or patches of carefully correlated tones and textures. No patch was brushed on before it had been thought and felt out, and probably very little correction had to be made. The construction is inherent, conceived in mass and relative values, without recourse to linear props or to facile short cuts of any kind. The method then is deliberate, but passionately so, the endeavor always being to represent the greatness of the character through the expressive plenitude of the form. I am sure the portraits of Speicher are very resemblant and also sure that they show something in the sitter that is not ordinarily seen—in short that they are a real idealization in the direction of what is permanent in the character.

The canvases are organized and vitalized from corner to corner. Every tone and texture is alive and works toward an effect which is both intimate and monumental. I suppose it was the need of a sensitive correlation of parts kept within his own control that led Speicher to turn his back on the lucrative career which his gifts assured him—professional portrait painting. It is possible to balance the claims of the portrait with those of the picture, but it is very difficult, and usually one or the other ideal is sacrificed. Speicher wisely forewent the ordeal. He would make pictures. Again this need of holding to preestablished relations forced Speicher to deny himself the always too amiable habit of painting in company. It would be as hard to catch Speicher painting as to find a woodcock on its nest. Company meant friendly advice, and friendly advice meant the blurring of some clear vision. The instrumental character of Speicher's handling is well expressed in a saying of his friend and mentor: "The finer the motive, the more the artist sees significance in what he looks at, the more he must be precise in the choice of his terms."

Speicher's beginnings fell at a time when the cult of large drawing and simplification and organization was rapidly becoming a mere fashion.

Many of the younger painters felt they could draw large by drawing empty; others conceived simplification as leaving almost everything out; still others sought organization within the narrow circuit of their own consciousness, ignoring that great storehouse of significant organization which is nature—in the main their attitude was negative, that of getting rid of things and, withal, of difficulties. Speicher's attitude was positive: the large drawing must be also rich; simplification means not leaving out, but putting in to the right extent; organization is fruitfully in the artist's mind only as he discovers it marvellously implicit in appearances. Thus whether Speicher is painting a girl, a landscape or a vase of flowers the synthesis is always rich. Nothing is neglected, nothing overstressed, everything to the edge of the canvas contributes. It is mentally very rich and likewise very rich in a sober and sustained passion.

Not colors but color is Speicher's aim. Held in the high key, with rare relieving accents of frank hue, what are on the palette the pale neutrals gain warmth and luminosity on the canvas. There is clearness and brightness with no suggestion of coldness or of glare. One may think of a reflection of some colorful object cooled and simplified in the depths of a quiet pool. Analytically considered, every area of paint has its self character and tells in juxtaposition, with nothing of oiliness, little glazing, and no ostensible bravura of handling. One might consider the handling of Speicher as so many slight and subtle variations of one strong and deliberate gesture. This is his handwriting, and from it comes the unity of his pictures. It of course merely externalizes the clarity and resoluteness of his thinking and feeling.

I suppose the notable or at least the best known Speichers are that gallery of young girls which quietly and often a little defiantly await your gaze in the museums and private galleries. There are a few nudes of large and noble accent. The rare portraits of men are of great character, while perhaps the richness and sensuousness of his technical achievement are really best shown in those numerous pictures of flowers so ten-

derly and largely felt and seen. His landscapes are of more uneven quality, the best extraordinarily vigorous and stable, many representing a holiday mood alien to his general strenuousness. A number of admirable chalk sketches show perhaps better than the run of the paintings his capacity to see landscape in terms of mass and selective emphasis. He has painted a great landscape or two, and, I am confident, can be one of our greater landscape painters if and when he wants to be. His drawings whether from the nude or portraits, are significant for their resolute and deliberate taking possession of the form in a monumental aspect. He thinks compositionally in terms of the great masses and rhythms and of a color as rich as it is reticent. Here I need not particularize, since the excellent reproductions in this book will tell the whole story.

When a painter has achieved so much at forty-eight, the question inevitably arises: what will he do next? In Speicher's case, will he keep on perfecting his established habit? One may trust him for that. Or will he seek new and wider fields with the old integrity and lucidity? No one can answer such a question but Speicher himself. "Masters are people who use what they have," and Speicher's answer will ultimately depend on his own estimate of what he has. Speicher's title to mastery seems to me so assured that he has little need of supporting it with new evidence. But I am sure that it would be very interesting if he did.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

EUGENE SPEICHER was born in Buffalo, New York, April 5, 1883, of American parents. He commenced the study of art in 1902 at the School of the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, Buffalo, N. Y., attending the evening classes and in 1906 was awarded the Albright General Scholarship by that school for further study in the Art Students' League of New York. He worked at the Art Students' League in 1907 and part of 1908 in the classes of Frank Vincent Dumond and William Chase. He attended the evening class of the Henri School of Art, New York, in 1909.

His study of drawing and painting in America has been augmented by extensive travel abroad, where he studied the art of the Museums and Galleries. In 1910 he visited France, Spain, Germany, England, Holland and Italy. In 1926 he traveled in France and Italy; again in 1929 in France, England, Germany, Austria, Hungary and Holland.

His work has been produced chiefly in New York City and in Woodstock, N. Y. He has been identified with the latter place since 1907.

His painting has been shown in the principal national and international museums and has been accorded the following honors: Albright Scholarship, Buffalo, N. Y., 1906; Kelly Prize and General Scholarship, New York Art Students' League, New York, N. Y., 1907; Thomas R. Proctor Portrait Prize, National Academy of Design, New York, N. Y., 1911; Isadore Portrait Prize, Salmagundi Club, New York, N. Y., 1913; Third Hallgarten Prize, National Academy of Design, New York, N. Y., 1914; First Hallgarten Prize, National Academy of Design, New York, N. Y., 1915; Silver Medal, Panama Pacific Exposition, San Francisco, Calif., 1915; Beck Gold Medal for Portraiture, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pa., 1920; Third Prize, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1921; Potter Palmer Gold Medal, Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, Ill., 1926; Second Prize, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1923; Second Clark Prize, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1928.

His work is represented in many private collections and in the following public institutions: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N. Y.; Yale University Museum, New Haven, Conn.; Galveston Museum of Art, Galveston, Texas; Decatur Museum of Art, Decatur, Ill.; Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, N. Y.; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio; Des Moines Art Association, Des Moines, Iowa; Minneapolis Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minn.; Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass.; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.; Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Mich.; Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, N. Y.; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.; Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N. Y.

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- "Eugene Speicher's drawings," *Arts and Decoration*, June, 1927—v. 27, p. 5; illus.
- "Eugene Speicher," *The Arts Portfolio Series*—12 plates.
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ILLUSTRATIONS

LILYA, 1930

H. 27 inches W. 24 inches

Collection of J. J. Emery, Cincinnati Art Museum



MOUNTAINEER, 1929

H. 54 inches W. 42 inches

Collection of Mr. Stephen C. Clark, New York



TORSE OF HILDA, 1928

H. 31½ inches W. 29 inches

Collection of Detroit Institute of Arts



FIRA BARCHAK, 1929

H. 64 inches w. 40 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



LOIS, 1929

H. 22 inches W. 19 inches

*Collection of The Brooklyn Museum
Brooklyn, N.Y.*



BRIGHAM'S YARD, EAST KINGSTON, 1928

H. 27 inches W. 34 inches

Collection of Mr. Edward W. Root, Clinton, N. Y.



J E A N N E A N D L Y D I A , 1 9 2 8

H. 52 inches W. 44 inches

*Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lesley Green Sheaffer
New York*



LANDSCAPE, RONDOUT, N. Y., 1928

H. 27 inches W. 34 inches

Collection of Mr. Charles Samson, Scarborough, N. Y.



MARY ELIZABETH. 1927
H. 20 inches W. 16 inches
Collection of General E. C. Young
Scarsdale, N. Y.



POLLY, 1927

H. 43 inches W. 36 inches

*Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York*



LYDIA AT THE TABLE, 1926

H. $27\frac{3}{16}$ inches W. $25\frac{7}{8}$ inches

*Collection of Gallery of Fine Arts, Yale University
New Haven, Conn.*



ASTERS, 1926

H. 20 inches W. 16 inches

*Collection of Mr. Frank Crowninshield
New York*



G I R L ' S H E A D, 1 9 2 5

H. 22 inches W. 19 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



SPRING BOUQUET, 1925

H. 20 inches W. 15 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



M L L E. J E A N N E B A L Z A C, 1 9 2 3

H. $50\frac{1}{4}$ inches W. $40\frac{3}{8}$ inches

*Collection of The Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection
Cleveland Museum of Art*



THE YOUNG HUNTER, 1921

H. 46 inches w. 36 inches

Collection of Pittsburgh Athletic Association



TORSE, 1920

H. 30 inches W. 24 inches

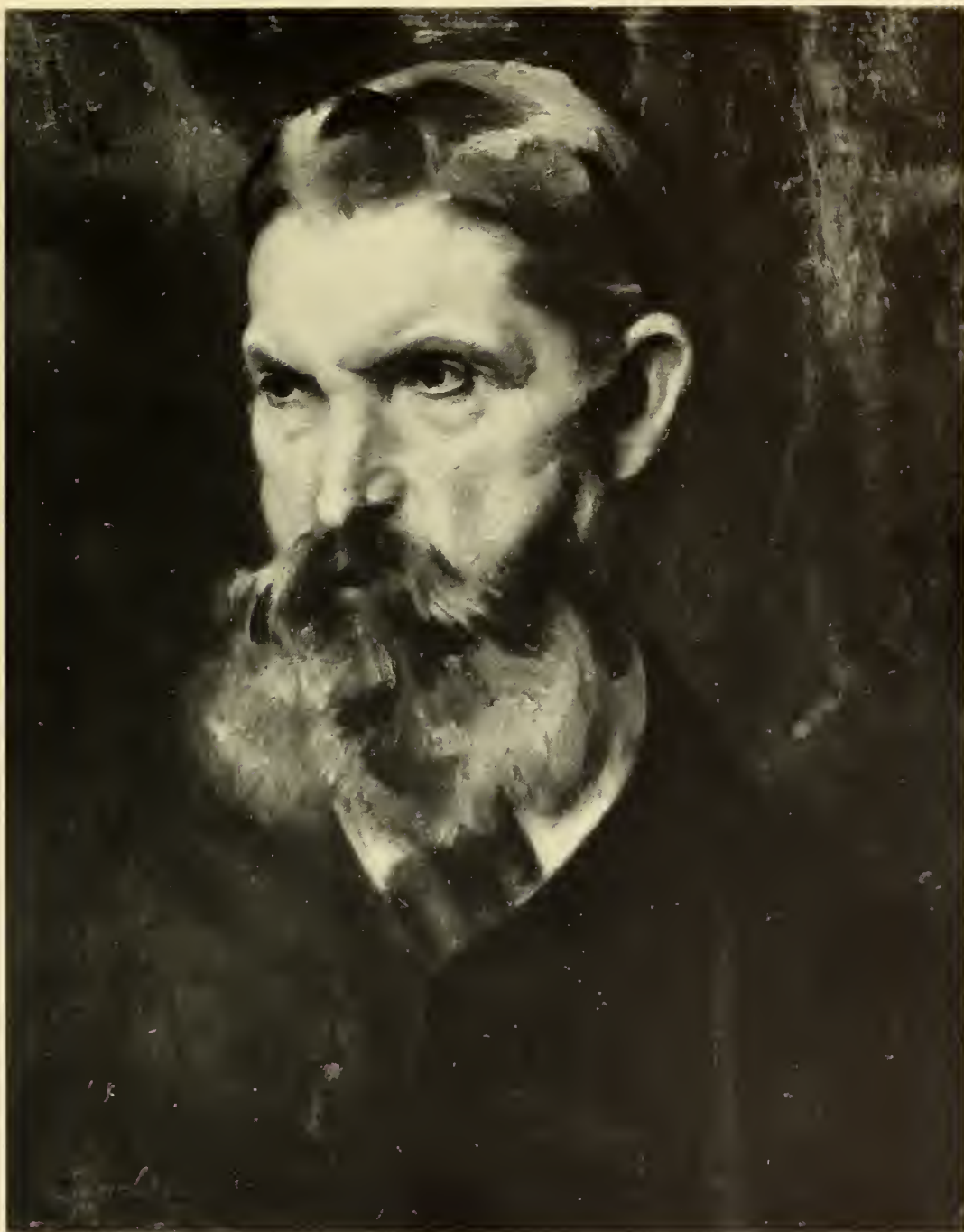
Collection of Mr. Carl W. Hamilton, New York



MAN'S HEAD, 1917

H. 20 inches W. 16 inches

Collection of Mr. Carl W. Hamilton, New York



BENDING FIGURE (*Pen drawing*), 1921
H. 11 inches w. 6 inches

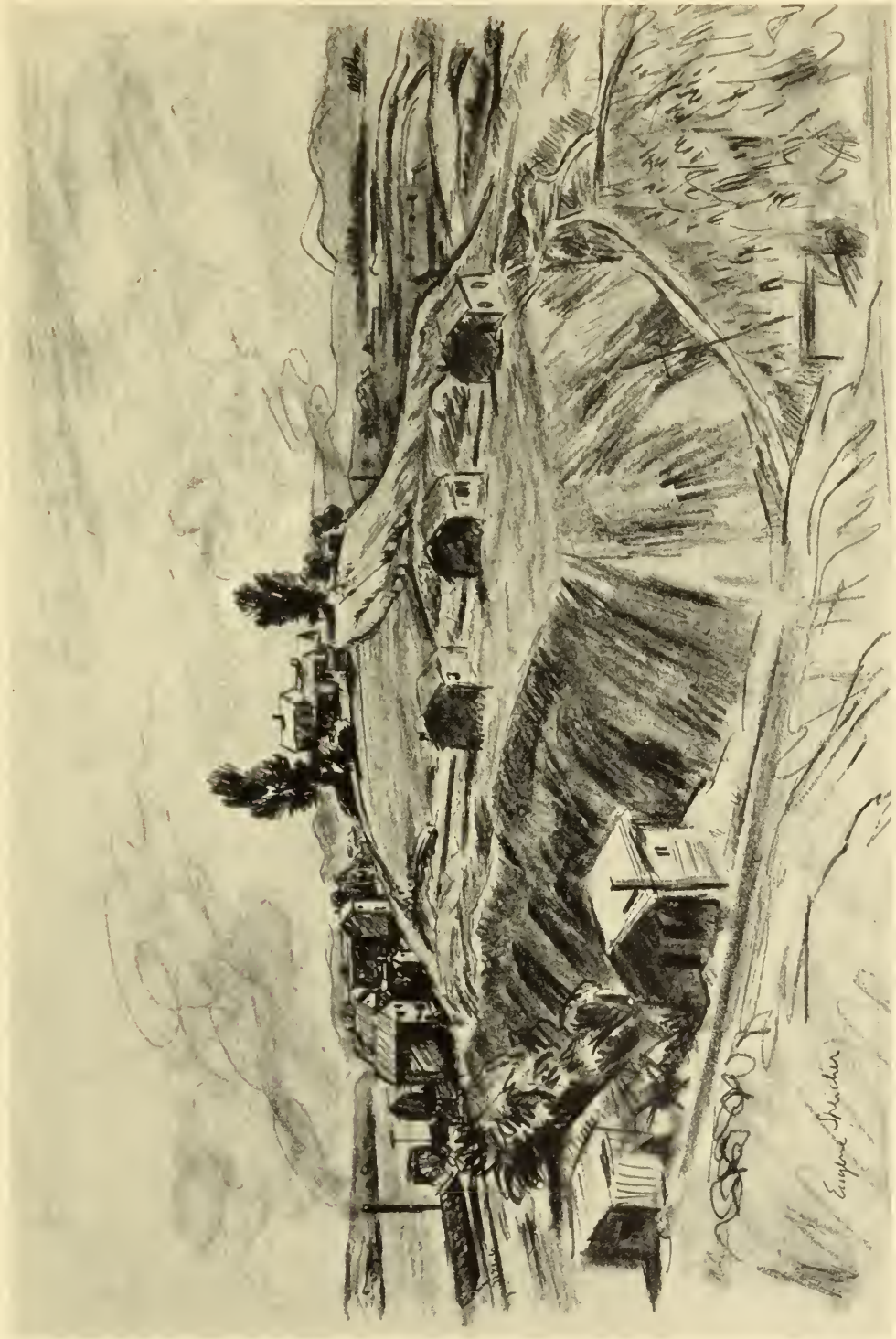


SNAKE HILL. EAST KINGSTON

(Pencil drawing), 1926

H. 8 inches W. 11 inches

Private collection



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